

The emergence of inter-municipal collaboration in Portuguese metropolitan planning

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Abstract

As metropolitan planning and policy challenges have grown more complex, governing models have shifted from highly compartmentalized and hierarchical structures towards more flexible, cooperative governance arrangements. In this context, inter-agency collaboration as a means for policy coordination has come to be seen as a solution to difficult and complex urban challenges.

In Portugal, where governance structures are highly fragmented, critics highlight the need for better coordination between local governments—a situation typical in many countries. However, meaningful collaboration and coordination around spatial and transportation planning, as forms “innovative” of urban governance, often remain slow to develop.

This paper aims to help understand whether, why and how inter-municipal collaboration around metropolitan land use and mobility planning emerges in Portugal. Focusing on a specific context—urban land use and mobility planning in Portugal—we seek to identify factors that contribute to or hinder voluntary collaboration and, in doing so, test the applicability of a previously developed theoretical model of intermunicipal collaboration. Furthermore, by introducing an institutionalist perspective to transportation planning, we aim to advance the debate around relevant policy integration.

Employing a case study method, we investigate nine cases from Portugal's two largest metropolitan areas, Porto and Lisbon. Through interviews with practitioners, we aim to understand institutional behavior at the individual and organizational level. Analyzing the cases against the existing theoretical model, we attempt to identify the factors and conditions which contribute to the emergence of collaborative relationships.

The analysis reveals that, in this context, inter-municipal collaboration has been facilitated by: positive incentives, ambiguity and flexibility in the institutional system, an external catalyst, existing inter-agency networks, and specific organizational characteristics. Importantly, the existence of any one of these factors is not enough. A combination of several factors, possible but apparently uncommon in Portugal, is necessary. Overall, the collaborative arrangements observed to date have been unable to tackle large scale problems of metropolitan development. This research suggests that the Portuguese planning system may be more likely to achieve metropolitan coordination of land use and transport policy through a metropolitan association with fiscal authority to incentivize collaborative projects.

Keywords: inter-municipal collaboration, metropolitan planning, policy integration